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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the activities and findings of a focus group study of teachers' perceptions of the Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools instructional program in reading language arts and the instructional system in mathematics. Two groups were organized to provide information to the school program planners to help them in revising and refining the curricula. A total of 33 primary, 31 upper elementary, and 20 J/I/M (junior high/intermediate level/middle school level) teachers participated in the 8 focus groups (43 teachers discussed reading language arts, and 42 discussed the mathematics instructional system, with 4 groups of 8-12 participants discussing each of the areas). Questions addressed by the group concern problems that the curricula may have due to an overly prescriptive orientation, heavy demands on teacher time, and lack of support for teachers in the form of staff training and assistance and materials. Group findings for the two curriculum program cover teachers' perceptions of the overall program, planning, testing, administrative supports, recordkeeping, and collaboration. Copies of the focus group discussion guides and a discussion of the methodology for conducting the focus groups are appended. (TJH)

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MONTGOMERY COUNTY
PUBLIC SCHOOLS
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

Focus Group Study of Teachers' Perceptions of the Instructional Program for Reading Language Arts and Instruction in Mathematics Curricula

March 1987

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MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Rockville, Maryland

FINAL REPORT

FOCUS GROUP STUDY OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM FOR READING LANGUAGE ARTS AND INSTRUCTION IN MATHEMATICS CURRICULA

by

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February 1987

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I

INTRODUCTION

Background and Purpose

This present report summarizes the activities and findings associated with the Focus Group Study of Teachers' Perceptions of the Instructional Program in Reading Language Arts (IPRLA or LARC[1]) and the Instructional System in Mathematics (ISM).

The purpose of conducting the focus groups was to provide information to MCPS program planners to consider in revising and refining the curricula. Of specific interest to the study were three major questions which have arisen:

- Are the systems overly prescriptive, allowing little flexibility for the creative, professional teacher?
- Are they too demanding of teacher time, requiring more planning and preparation time than curricula used elsewhere?
- Are the teachers receiving adequate supports in terms of staff training, staff supports and materials?

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1 There are 2 acronyms in use in MCPS for the reading program. "IPRA/LA" and "LARC." Since the teachers who participated in this study used "LARC," this term will be used in the remainder of this report.

The present study was conducted with a random sample of MCPS teachers in Grades 1 through 8, stratified by years of experience and grade levels taught. Teachers were interviewed about either LARC or ISM, with four groups discussing each of the areas. In total 43 teachers participated in the discussion of LARC and 42 in the discussion of ISM.

Nature and Purpose of Focus Group Research

In interpreting the study findings, it is important to understand both the strengths and delimitations of the focus group approach used here. Focus group discussions are a form of qualitative research. Focus groups are often used as the sole method of research for a particular study or they may be used as a precursor to or in conjunction with a quantitative research effort.

A focus group typically consists of eight to twelve respondents who engage in an informal discussion on a topic for a period of about one and a half hours. A focus group is led by a skilled moderator who uses a discussion guide to ensure that key points are covered and who maintains a non-directive style of interviewing. The discussion guides are designed to be more general and flexible than quantitative research instruments so as to permit the moderator to follow-up on unexpected changes in the direction of the conversation.

Focus groups encourage small group interplay without the threats of one-to-one interviewing or impersonal large groups. In general, respondents are encouraged to speak freely, to interact, to voice disagreeing opinions, even to argue, and thus to voice all sides of an issue. In this way, it is possible to achieve a greater depth into an issue than can be accomplished through traditional surveys.

Because quantitative research must be very specific in order to satisfy concerns about data validity and reliability, it is of extremely limited value in gaining insight into a respondent's attitudes and opinions; it can only scratch the surface in this respect. Focus groups, on the other hand, create an ideal environment for uncovering and exploring attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors and for understanding why a respondent thinks or behaves in such a manner.

While the groups enable the researcher to gain insight into what respondents say and think, the data are not quantitative; there is no measure of how many people think or behave in a particular way. Further, because the technique involves group discussion, some respondents may influence others. Responses are not independent, and questions are not asked in precisely the same way each time.

Nevertheless, focus group research offers a richness of anecdotal information which is making the technique indispensable to researchers working in a wide variety of settings. When used as a jumping off point for quantitative research, focus groups provide strong direction for the decision-maker to pursue; the group discussions identify and clarify salient issues and develop hypotheses for testing and measuring. When used along with quantitative research, focus groups provide a rich source for contextual information for better understanding statistical data.

The analysis of the focus group discussions concentrates, in general, on (1) identifying the nature of the respondents' awareness, knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors with respect to the issues; and (2) how they articulate these issues. The analysis also addresses differences

among groups who participated in the discussions. The objective is not to report any consensus or even a majority vote with respect to any issue. A single mention of what appears to be a relevant issue is noteworthy; if an idea emerges from a focus group, it represents the opinion of some members of the general population from which the respondents are drawn.

This report should be understood as discovering hypotheses and providing insights into the phenomenology of the populations of interest. The major questions to be considered are WHY respondents feel and act as they do rather than HOW MANY respondents feel or act in these ways.

Summary of Findings and Teacher Recommendations

The focus groups provide a rich discussion of both teachers' perceptions of the reading and mathematics curricula and suggestions for how their role as implementors of the programs might be facilitated. Presented below is a brief summary of the comments made by the teachers and suggestions they offered. For a more complete presentation of the teachers' opinions, including many valuable quotes from the participants themselves, the reader is urged to read the detailed findings section beginning on page 11 of this report.

Are the systems overly prescriptive, allowing little flexibility for the creative professional teacher?

Teachers' responses indicate that the answer to this question is an emphatic "No!" By and large teachers like the systems, are philosophically in favor of them and feel that they are instructionally sound. Teachers feel that these MCPS programs allow for the exercise of teachers' professional skills and creativity. In typical comments, teachers said:

- "LARC is exciting and challenging . . . it gives us a springboard to develop our own lessons."

- "I think ISM is the most wonderful thing ever invented! It's the most sensible system I've ever encountered."

Are the systems too demanding of teacher time, requiring more planning and preparation time than curricula used elsewhere?

Teachers strongly felt that LARC and ISM are very demanding. They described the task of learning to implement the reading curriculum as "overwhelming" and stated that both the reading and mathematics programs require very significant amounts of planning time. Both teachers new to Montgomery County and teachers more experienced in the county cited the need for developing means of assisting staff with the tasks of planning and preparing for instruction. Teachers said:

- "Time is a real problem. I love LARC and I love teaching, but I only have so much time. I don't like reinventing the wheel. I'd like to get together with other 4th grade teachers to share good ideas and plan lessons. We need to have opportunities to share these ideas."

- "I kept track for a while, and I was actually putting in 20 hours a week planning for ISM, and that was time outside of the school day. There's really no time for planning during the school day."

Are the present systems receiving adequate supports in terms of staff training, staff supports and materials?

Teachers expressed unanimous concern about the inadequacy of the supports they were provided. Training was perceived to be insufficient both for experienced and inexperienced teachers. The usability and availability of materials was repeatedly cited as a problem in implementation of LARC.

Teachers using ISM also decried the lack of a single text or worksheets keyed to the scope and sequence of the ISM objectives, as well as limited aide time and computer support as areas posing problems for them.

Further, the record keeping forms and criterion-referenced tests which presently accompany both systems were viewed negatively by most participants.

The teachers reported

- (Of LARC) "My 7th grade curriculum was like that fruit platter on the table. I could teach grapes if I wanted or I could teach apples . . . I don't know if I'm supposed to, but that's the way I think it is."

- (Of LARC) "Materials are not always available . . . I looked for a recommended book for 10 days and found it was out of print!"

- (Of ISM)"They took you away from your class -- which was how I viewed it -- three days during the school year to talk to you about ISM, and they didn't tell you anything new. It would have been much more helpful if they would have said, "OK, bring your books, bring your data -- your class data -- and we'll have little

work sessions where you can sit and plan. We'll go around and help you."

- (Of ISM.) "We have a math aide for one-half day per month, which amounts to about one hour. So I have to do the assessments and recording myself. We're just crying for more aide time."

- (Of ISM) "I liked it on the mainframe better because you could send any kid for testing at any level. Now on the micro you can't handle two kids for testing who are on different diskettes. Also, we have fewer terminals with micros than we did on the mainframe. Kids have trouble just getting things to work."

To remedy these problems the teachers have offered a number of solutions.

First, with regard to LARC:

1. Provide more support to new teachers

   - help new teachers by providing realistic and clear expectations regarding the speed at which they are expected to learn and implement the curriculum

   - develop a mentor program to assist teachers in learning the curriculum, developing lesson plans, and locating materials

   - expand the training opportunities which are available before school starts in the fall.

2. Provide more and different training for all teachers in how to implement the program

- match training to the needs of the teachers; different choices and offerings should be available for more and less experienced teachers
- offer training to teachers of the same grade level in cluster groups rather than mixed grade levels
- provide more opportunity for demonstrations by master teachers and specialists and peer visitations.

3. Increase the availability and usability of support materials

- revise, streamline, and index the curriculum guides so that they can be more readily used
- update the novel lists so that outdated books are no longer listed
- increase the supply of novels and provide a microcomputer-based locator system which permits teachers to more readily locate novels that can be shared
- examine the criterion-referenced tests to see how they can be made more useful to teachers.

Second, with regard to ISM:

1. Provide more support to new teachers

- develop a mentor program to help teachers in learning the curriculum, developing lesson plans, and locating materials
- expand the training opportunities that are available before school starts in the fall.

2. Provide more training for all teachers

   - develop hands-on "gimmicks" for teaching basic facts and problem solving in order to help students move from mere memorization of material
   - provide help in correlating ISM and CSMP.

3. Revise the current assessment process and assess its supports

   - revise the use of the mastery assessment process so that it provides a more accurate and up-to-date picture of what students really know
   - improve the adequacy of existing support systems for scoring of assessments, looking especially at the adequacy of aide time and practical usability of microcomputers
   - examine the end of year criterion-referenced tests to see how they can be made more useful.

4. Refine the current curriculum

   - revise the sequencing objectives especially those at the K, 1 levels and those pertaining to fractions
   - build in a review component to combat problems associated with lack of retention
   - examine the expectations regarding number of objectives to be mastered.

5. Increase existing material and staff supports

- increase the availability and appropriateness of textbooks and worksheets, consider developing a single textbook which more adequately reflects ISM, and/or a set of worksheets keyed to the ISM objectives
- increase the aide time available for demos, grading papers, recording grades, and assisting in instruction
- provide additional time for planning, record keeping, and for articulating between the elementary and J/I/M levels.

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II

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS OF THE INDIVIDUAL FOCUS GROUPS DISCUSSING LARC

This chapter contains the combined findings of the four focus groups which were convened to discuss LARC. The chapter is organized into a number of sections, each of which is devoted to a different component of LARC. These include:

- Overall Views: Strengths and Weaknesses
- Planning
- Criterion-Referenced Test (CRT)
- Administrative Supports (Training/Resources)
- Record Keeping
- Collaboration
- Other Issues

Representative comments from the teachers participating in all four focus groups are included in each section as applicable. The focus group which was the source of the comment is identified in parentheses (after the comment) by the following abbreviations:

Primary 2 yrs. = Primary school teachers with 2 years MCPS teaching experience (n=12)

Up. el. 3-10 yrs. = Upper elementary school teachers with 3 - 10 years MCPS teaching experience (n=10)

Up. el. 11+ yrs. = Upper elementary school teachers with more than 10 years MCPS teaching experience (n=10)

J/I/M = J/I/M teachers of English with 2 - 6 years MCPS teaching experience (n=10)

When teacher comments are used in the text of the findings, they are presented in quotation marks. When their comments are set off by bullets, quotation marks are not used. Occassionally, the comments have been paraphrased for ease of reading. References to a "few" teachers means two, "some" means three or four, "many" means at least half, and a "majority" means almost all.

A. Overall Attitudes: Strengths and Weaknesses

The teachers' views on LARC were generally very positive. They found that it is appropriate for students at all working levels and that it combines well with the traditional basal system. In fact, most prefer LARC over the basal approach. Most of the teachers saw the curriculum as being very comprehensive, providing teachers with a great deal of instructional flexibility and creativity, and they enjoy the variety of materials and books at their disposal. Most pointed out, however, that these same advantages could easily become serious disadvantages for newer teachers who may be easily overwhelmed by the curriculum and who need a more structured curriculum which specifies exactly what to teach. The following statements capture the teachers' sentiments in this area:

- It's not a simple reading curriculum. It's a good way to introduce kids to story structure. Its best value is that it's not limiting — ideas can be applied to anything. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- It forces you to become organized and learn the sequence of skills, makes you aware of all skills as kids go through the grades. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- Kids get bored easily, but the wide variety of books and materials makes it interesting to children. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- LARC brings unity to the classroom. You can use it with the whole class. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- LARC is for everyone. You adapt it to meet different needs. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- LARC gives you more flexibility than basals. I check my own books out of the library. (Primary 2 yrs.)
- It's a key way to get away from basals. (Primary 2 yrs.)
- Basals make kids competitive. (Primary 2 yrs.)
- I'm glad LARC gets us out of the basal. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- When used as a guide, the curriculum has no limits. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- It's a darn good curriculum and provides variety. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- The writing part of the curriculum is fantastic and the most valuable addition. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- It's not a step-by-step curriculum. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- It's the official curriculum. I can't imagine any school not using it. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- LARC gives us a springboard to develop creative lessons . . . But for the person who is still having a hard time with the basics, it's hard to branch off. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)
- It's very open-ended, yet the structure needs to be there as well . . . However, down the line, that open-endedness gets to be very attractive because if you've been teaching for a number of years, you have that opportunity to go with your own creativity. I'd

hate to see it so systematized that you've lost that creativity. (up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

While the teachers acknowledged the advantages associated with LARC, they also pointed out a number of limitations to the curriculum. These include: the lack of planning time, out-of-date novels, shortages of novels, not having enough different novels for each grade level, problems associated with the curriculum guides and record keeping system, and the need to provide teachers with more direction for implementing LARC. These are discussed in detail in the following sections of this chapter.

B. **Planning**

Teachers indicated that the comprehensive and flexible nature of the MCPS curriculum demands more planning time for implementation than the more highly structured basal approach. They also indicated that the time required to plan adequately goes beyond the school day. Reports were that eights to 10 hours of planning per week (beyond the time provided during the school day) was not uncommon.

- I spend more than a day within any given week planning. (J/I/M; Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- LARC demands that you make up a lot of your own materials. The time demand is unending. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- To do LARC well takes a lot of time. The only way I survived last year was by using skill worksheets that our reading teacher prepared. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- I spend six to eight hours per week planning for LARC. I arrive at school a good hour and a half before the students do almost everyday and I use all of that time planning what I'm going to teach and how I'm going to interrelate the journals . . . that does take a lot of thought. (J/I/M)

- Time is a real problem. I love LARC and I love teaching, but I only have so much time. I don't like reinventing the wheel. I'd like to get together with other 4th grade teachers to share good ideas and plan lessons. We need to have opportunities to share these ideas. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- It really needs to be part of the program to be able to plan. A new teacher could meet with an experienced teacher, maybe in the summer. MCPS should give us time to work in groups and brainstorm ideas. They should give us a half day with no children in the room. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- You could work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and still not do everything you're supposed to do! But LARC's a great idea for a pure reading teacher who doesn't have other duties. (Primary 2 yrs.)

C. Testing

Teachers had mixed feelings about the usefulness of the criterion-referenced test (CRT) results. Some contended that the tests are a good measure of what has been taught and that the results are useful for grouping students and for identifying skill areas which are in need of further work. Others argued that the tests do not always accurately reflect what has been taught. There appears to be some confusion about out-of-level testing, and it was also very obvious that some misconceptions exist over the interpretation and use of test scores from the CRT. Further, many of the teachers claimed that the results of the tests are not received early enough in the school year to be of use. Finally, there was some bitterness expressed over the possibility of using CRTs to evaluate the performance of a teacher or a school.

- One advantage of CRTs is that it meets one-on-one with our curriculum. (J/I/M)
- If you aren't teaching the objectives it will show up on the CRTs. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- The test is sensitive enough to determine if the curriculum has been taught. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- The CRT is a tool for teachers to use to group students. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- The CRTs help. We found we were not doing enough inferencing. We assumed that they had mastered a certain skill, but it did not show up on the CRTs. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- The reading teacher in the school uses the results to help identify specific reading weaknesses. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- CRT is not a good enough measure of accountability. We need a system. We've been told it's not very accurate. It doesn't really reflect what has been taught. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- There's a lot more to doing well on the CRT than just having good reading skills. . . students need to learn test-taking skills because they can't fill in the answer sheets. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- The vocabulary used in the test is the problem, not that kids don't understand the questions. Certain words throw students off. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- In administering the test I had a terrible time deciding who would get which test. I agonized over it. . . . There were no criteria to use to decide who was to get which test. . . . We didn't get any criteria. (J/I/M)

- If your scores are above 80 percent it means you tested the kids on the wrong level. (J/I/M)

- If you're in a school that has done well on the CRTs, the pressure to keep CRT scores up is unreal. (J/I/M)

- CRT results are not timely, you get them a year later. (Primary 2 yrs.; Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- Last year we used them because we had them right away. This year we didn't get them. (J/I/M)

- I think everyone would agree that there is a problem with assessments . . . they're working on that now. The CRTs make sense to a point but there are still some problems . . . the CRTs should not be used to compare schools. (J/I/M)

- In my school the results are used to evaluate teacher effectiveness. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- There is some bitterness in our school about the CRTs and all standardized tests because my school always comes out on the lower side in LARC. I don't think our English department is bad. . . . we have a highly transient population . . . we're failing - we get that feeling and feedback. We feel that we are teaching the curriculum. (J/I/M)

D. Administrative Supports (Training, Resources)

Comments in this area revolved around the adequacy of the training the teachers received in preparing them to implement LARC. This was discussed in terms of college training and MCPS in-service training. Other topics discussed under this area were the teachers' perceptions of the availability of administrative supports and their perceptions of the LARC support materials.

College Training

There was agreement among novice and experienced teachers alike that their college education had not prepared them to teach this type of reading/language arts curriculum. The following comments epitomized this sentiment:

- All we had in college was methods, methods, methods. Methods in isolation of the content. What you need is more demonstration of the lessons outside of the college classroom, more role-playing. The first year of teaching is almost like a fifth year in college, like an apprenticeship. I couldn't pull any of what I learned in college and apply it to teaching LARC. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- We were not trained like that in the 1960's. Anyone who has not been trained in the area of teaching of comprehension skills is going to be overwhelmed by LARC. They will not know the steps in teaching reading. It's a literature-based curriculum. I would tell a new teacher to do what she can do. Go through the basal if necessary to get the skills. Don't try to do everything in one year, don't try to teach it all. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- There should be an internship for the new teacher for the first three years. It takes that long to feel comfortable with LARC. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- College training should be real teacher education. It should encourage us to be creative. No one told us to be creative. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- I came in the middle of the year and I could do nothing besides model the teachers that I saw teaching their classes because I had no idea where to begin . . . I'm serious . . . I hadn't the vaguest notion . . . I wasn't schooled in my college or high school experience by an objectives-based curriculum . . . (J/I/M)

In-Service Training

The deficiencies in the teachers' college education in preparing them to teach LARC underscored the need for in-service training in this area. A clear distinction in preparedness to implement the curriculum was evident between teachers who had participated in in-service training prior to teaching and those who had not. Teachers who had participated in the preservice training felt much more comfortable with implementing the curriculum than did teachers who were hired late in the school year. Teachers in this latter group indicated that initially they were completely "lost". Across the board, teachers felt that it took them two to three years to become comfortable with the curriculum and to get a firm handle on how they were supposed to implement it.

- I taught for half a year without training. I was totally at sea. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- After the in-service, it stopped being so intimidating to me. This is just a guide, you have the rest of your career to learn how to implement it. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- I had a great in-service. The philosophy was that the curriculum is LARC, basal should just supplement it. LARC provides the objectives, the goals. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- The training I received before school started was very helpful. The people who did that training were very specific about how this curriculum should be implemented. . . I left feeling how wonderful — although it was still overwhelming at least I had some direction. When I got to the school, every teacher in that English department was implementing the curriculum in a different way. (J/I/M)

- Training should be closer to the beginning of the school year, and more time should be spent on learning new curriculum developments. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- Summer time training would be ideal. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

Some teachers indicated that while the in-service training has been helpful, it has not been specific enough. New teachers, in particular, expressed the need for more structure and direction, especially in terms of when and what they are supposed to teach. More demonstrations by mentors or "master teachers" were viewed as the answer to this problem by a number of teachers.

- Too much time is spent on just being introduced to new paper work, and little time is really spent on learning what's new and how to really teach what's new. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- Last year was my first year teaching . . . when my resource teacher gave me the notebook with the objectives I said, "Oh my God, there's no way I'm going to cover all this," and sure enough, I didn't. (J/I/M)

- I feel like I'm drowning from an overwhelming curriculum. (J/I/M)

- My 7th grade curriculum was like that fruit platter on the table. I could teach grapes if I wanted or I could teach apples . . . I don't know if I'm supposed to, but that's the way I think it is. That's great from the teacher creativity point of view, but from the other point of view I feel very undirected . . . I don't know what students are supposed to know at the end of the year. (J/I/M)

- I took the LARC course, but it was really training in the red book. A semester course just went through the guide. It wasn't specific enough. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- The county should stress <u>skills</u> with the new teacher. The new teacher needs direction in what skills are needed using this guide. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- Get yourself a mentor because the curriculum is overwhelming. You need someone who knows the short-cuts, who knows the ropes. Getting a mentor is absolutely essential. (J/I/M)

- The mentor should be compensated . . . donation of this time, up to two hours a day, is not something the veteran teacher should be asked to do. (J/I/M)

- It's not just one mentor, but it takes the whole department to make that new teacher feel really comfortable with the curriculum. (J/I/M)

- Let's have more master teachers demonstrating how these lessons should be taught. But master teachers should not be pulled out of their classrooms if they are good teachers because they don't want to miss class. So instead, you should be able to go to their classrooms and observe them in action. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- They incorporate this idea in the county. Specialists come to the classroom and demonstrate. I, as a veteran teacher, have really tightened my teaching because of this. There are also teachers you can go and observe outside of school. There's a list of teachers who do this. You get substitute time. But it's an ordeal to leave a class. It's easier not to go because of the time and having to leave your class. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

A number of teachers argued that future in-services would be more useful if they were restricted to teachers at the same grade level.

- In-service is now grouped for K to 3. It's too far to stretch. K is a different world, and in 3rd grade, kids can read. So the needs are very different. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- I get nothing out of mixed in-service. I have to do extra work for them. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- With a single grade level in-service, everyone helps everyone else. (Primary 2 yrs.)

Other comments on in-service training include the following:

- More emphasis should be placed on exposition in the lower grades. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- We would like to see more cross-school training and sharing of ideas. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- Training should take into consideration the experience of the teacher. It doesn't. Everything isn't appropriate for everyone. We should have different choices and offerings for those with greater experience. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

Administrative Supports

Teachers perceptions of the availability of administrative supports were mixed and appear to be a function of the organizational structure in individual schools. All of the teachers felt that implementing LARC is nearly impossible without administrative support. The following statement from a teacher typified teachers' sentiments on this issue: "It's a tough curriculum to grasp without teamwork and support." Many teachers felt that they get adequate support from principals, building specialists, and area office specialists, but some did not.

In some schools reading specialists are readily available to provide assistance and support for teachers, whereas in other schools they are not.

- Some reading specialists are scheduled into five classes and cannot offer support for teachers in the school. (J/I/M)

- In our school, reading specialists are scheduled into classes and we don't see them. (J/I/M)

- I feel extremely fortunate to be in a school where the reading position is a resource position . . . I can make myself available to work with teachers . . . last week I worked with the French teachers in their classes, this week I'm with the Arts teachers helping them teach kids to take notes . . . I'm constantly with the Science teachers . . . We have the skills to help you . . . (J/I/M)

- One thing that I found was very helpful -- my reading specialist gave me a list of books organized by topics. She pointed out, for example, that characterization can be found in certain stories on certain pages. (Primary 2 yrs.)

LARC Resources

The teachers enumerated the deficiencies of the LARC resources. Specifically, they noted that the books are either out-of-date or that there is not a sufficient number of books to go around. Some teachers indicated that a listing of the books available at each school in the county would be very useful.

- Some of the things are so outdated -- 10 years old! (Primary 2 yrs.)

- I looked for a book for 10 days and found that it was out of print! (Primary 2 yrs.)

- Materials are not always available. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- Many of the recommended books are no longer being published. A lot of things are out-of-date. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- The county should be more attuned to the needs of individual schools to have resources to implement this curriculum . . . our literature books are out-of-print and dwindling . . . and we aren't able to teach literature effectively. In my 7th grade classes we have one set of books and they can't do anything at home. It's difficult to do the planning when the resources aren't there. (J/I/M)

- There aren't enough materials to go around. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- Another thing, we don't have a lot of multiple copies of books. The best way for lower achieving kids to read is to have them follow along as I read. I feel guilty when I read them the book but they can't follow along. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- When there aren't enough books, the kids tell their parents. And then their parents call <u>you</u> and want to know why this is so. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- I get five copies of a novel and I have 23 kids! There's not enough. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- We need more books. I have three classes and one set of reading literature, 30 books, that's it . . . (J/I/M)

- We each have one set of anthologies . . . you can't sign them out because you need them for the other classes. (J/I/M)

- We have the same situation. (J/I/M)

- Area 3 has a list of books by school. That would be useful for me and other teachers to have so that we could know what's available. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- I want to know what every school in the county has, not just Area 3. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- Some schools don't want to share books. (Primary 2 yrs.)

Many teachers felt that there are not enough different novels for each grade level.

- I get tired of using and teaching the same novels. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- The content of the novels is sometimes disturbing and upsetting for some students. I could overcome this if I had more books to choose from. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- There's not enough flexibility with certain materials. We can't use certain novels for certain grades. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- We need better biographies in the 8th grade. The only one we ever use is Harriet Tubman . . . Mother Jones is too hard for the kids to read . . . Fredrick Douglass you can forget . . . the lower level of Fredrick Douglass is too easy . . . Mat Henson, . . . forget that. . . . If we could only get another nice biography for

8th grade that the kids could appreciate, I would be happy. (J/I/M)

Some teachers noted that they are using other novels from those recommended to teach the objectives, but this seems to occur in schools where teachers are encouraged to be creative. Using other novels to teach the objectives is not necessarily widespread as this practice is not encouraged in some schools. One teacher noted that "Sometimes teachers are not encouraged by administrators to use other novels. And sometimes we are told to use only those novels recommended. Using novels that are recommended for another grade level is completely out."

Another area which generated a lot of discussion was the need for MCPS to provide more detailed lesson plans with specific instructions for implementation.

- The curriculum is too overwhelming. You try to teach too much and end up teaching nothing. So you have to pick and choose which objectives to teach. That way, the class can learn a thing well. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- Newer teachers need a curriculum with more structure, a curriculum that would show them exactly what to teach. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- LARC can be overwhelming to the novice teacher. It's too large and demanding for a new teacher. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- Teachers need a lot of resource help and direction. Not just new teachers. New teachers need more structure that gets back to the

skills. We should be able to use novels that are skill-based. We need skill lessons to use with a novel. This is true for special education, gifted and talented, and regular levels. LARC should be more like the ISM with skill and mastery levels. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- The county should give us more detailed lesson plans instead of just giving us broad ideas. For first and second year teachers there should be a game plan, giving teachers specific direction. For example, work on characterization the first two months, spend three days on this, one week on that. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- The county should do more for us. They could give us more lesson plans instead of just giving us such a broad idea. We don't have time to teach all these things. We need more detailed plans with more specific instructions. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- The county has not developed enough lessons or suggestions for each FIRN or FIRE. They give a few suggestions that you hope are in your building. There's not enough information on cohesion. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

A final area which generated a great deal of discussion was the curriculum guides. Most of the teachers said that the guides are not well organized. This lack of organization makes the guides appear "overwhelming." Some teachers also mentioned that the guides are not sequential. "It would be nice if the reading objectives were organized like the ISM objectives." Comments on these limitations include the following:

- The curriculum guides need a general overview. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- Streamline the guides with more organization, more sequence to the objectives. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- The set-up of the red guide is very difficult to get through. I have taken mine apart and reorganized it, but that should be done for us. And we should be able to keep the guide over the summer. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- The red guide needs to be updated and cleaned out too. New things should be added to it. This should be done for us. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- I don't find the guide to be very organized. We need to reorganize the sequence of the curriculum too. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- The humongous guide is overwhelming to new teachers. We are really drowning! (Primary 2 yrs.)

- My principal said that the guides are overwhelming and that they take three years to master. They should tell this to all new teachers. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- The big red guide has over 1,000 pages, and its table of contents only has four things listed! It really needs an index. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- Sometimes you get carried away with LARC and a lot of skills get lost in the cracks. What's lacking are phonics and decoding skills. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- I'm still confused by the message I'm getting from the county in terms of grammar, sentence patterns, etc. All I've been told is, incorporate it into the reading program. But the reading program doesn't have any units designed to work from. . . . It's supposed to be kind of like magic. (J/I/M)

- I don't think we need a unit of formal grammar because that would isolate it, and I don't think it should be isolated. It would be good if we had some kind of listing or sequencing of specific grammatical skills we should teach . . . then we would know what to interweave as we teach the other things. But what do we weave it in? That's the question. (J/I/M)

- There is too much emphasis on narration and not enough on exposition. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- The curriculum does not address higher order thinking skills. Teachers have to develop these themselves. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- What about reading comprehension? In the other county that I worked in, every kid had reading instruction everyday, plus English. In Montgomery County I'm still not clear on where the kids, by the time they get to junior high, get reading instruction unless they have a problem, and then they only get reading support. (J/I/M)

- I do reading for meaning once a week for 20 minutes . . . it's not a part of the curriculum, but it was suggested by one of the veteran teachers in my school. (J/I/M)

- I agree that we should have at least 20 minutes of structured reading a week where we could discuss what we've read. The sustained silent reading is a total waste of time because I don't know what the children are reading or if they are reading at all. (J/I/M)

- I see nothing wrong with pleasure reading as long as the teacher can go beyond that . . . what did you read? What are the specifics of what you read? (J/I/M)

- The worst thing that a teacher can do with a literary work is to reduce it to a reading comprehension exercise . . . That is not the reason I go home and read a book at night. I read it for a larger purpose. They cannot read a simple science passage and tell me something about an atom. (J/I/M)

- People developing the curriculum are just doing a surface job. The teacher teaching the curriculum is doing the real curriculum development. And we could share a lot of good ideas. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

- Someone has to decide what's important -- quantity or quality. The curriculum materials can spread you too far. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

E. Record Keeping

None of the teachers who discussed this issue likes the Reading and Listening Student Record Form. Several teachers questioned the form's usefulness, claiming that no one looks at it, and wondered who the list helps. Many teachers use their own forms to record the skills and objectives covered. The teachers' comments on the prescribed record keeping form include:

- We tried using the form but it stinks! It's just busy work. Nobody looks at it. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.; Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- It's not standardized in terms of how to fill it out. Some teachers use Xs and others write in it. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)
- I don't know who it is for. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.; Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- I wouldn't use the form. I would prefer to list what you do with the child. Or, to have check-off lists for the objectives in the grade. We should have broad-based objectives that will serve as a mastery test, and the test will be your record. But the objectives should not be as specific as ISM because it's hard to measure some of the specific objectives of reading. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

F. Collaboration

Much of the collaboration that is taking place at the elementary school level revolves around sharing information with other teachers in order to reduce the amount of time necessary for planning lessons. The teachers agreed that such collaboration is very useful, especially for the novice teacher. They argued the need for the county to provide teachers with more free time away from the students, outside of school hours, for this purpose.

- Ask teachers to send some of their better things to a central location and share it with everyone. Lesson plans and materials to go with each novel and each grade level would be very helpful. Or even share materials that have been developed outside the county. The point is, we need to share the knowledge this is available. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- I attended an in-service this summer and met other 1st grade teachers, and we formed a group. We meet once per month to share things. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- Our reading teacher did an area in-service. Now she has a file full of materials that we can all use. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- We integrated our objectives with social studies and language arts and planned our activities and books. Our students do so much more writing when the two are integrated, but it takes a lot of planning. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)

- I was teamed with another teacher last year . . . and we are helping each other, sharing. I teach characterization and she teaches setting. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- It's nice for me, without a lot of experience, to be sharing. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- Teachers in my school share too. We each "go to town" on one book. For doing that, you get 15 back from other teachers! (Primary 2 yrs.)

- We have five 3rd grades. We share. We all teach the same book at the same time. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- "My busy work" has been cut in half because of sharing. I can improve my teaching. (Primary 2 yrs.)

There was a general consensus among the J/I/M teachers that a substantial amount of collaboration occurs between the LARC teachers within each school and between feeder and recipient schools. It was pointed out that this collaboration is very important. Furthermore, the group agreed that additional time needs to be created to allow more of it to take place.

- In the first two weeks of school we have team meetings. Everyone in a given grade knows what everybody else is doing. Our resource and reading teachers have gone to all of our feeder schools, and they bring back all of the information. So we have a lot of collaboration. (J/I/M)

- We do too. Last year we went to our feeder schools to observe their 6th grades and they came to our school to observe . . . we also meet in a group to discuss our objectives. I think there should be more of it . . . I think it's a great idea. (J/I/M)

- Within schools there needs to be more communication about physical things like vocabulary series . . . now we all go to the high school, as one of the feeder schools, and they tell us what they want our kids to know. The problem with that is that the feeder schools have different resources, one uses Romeo and Juliet to teach an objective and another uses Raisin in the Sun to teach the same objective. There needs to be more communication between the feeder schools and the schools they're going into. (J/I/M)

G. Other Issues

Among the other issues discussed by the teachers were their perceptions of the concept of receiving some kind of special recognition for a significant improvement in student achievement in LARC and the kinds of parental feedback they have received on LARC.

The notion of using special recognition or awards for schools making significant improvements in students' achievement was collectively dismissed by teachers in the two groups which discussed this issue. The mood of the groups indicated that they perceived the notion as simplistic and unworthy of serious consideration.

- Just give me money . . . (J/I/M)
- The recognition for test scores is a boondoggle because of different populations . . . I've heard rumors that some teachers cheated a little bit on the MFWT -- we won't mention any schools but they were on the front page of the Journal. (J/I/M)
- I'm totally against the idea of using special recognition or awards. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- I think it's wrong to use CRT results for this purpose. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)

The teachers also discussed the kinds of feedback on LARC that they have received from parents and the impact of this feedback on their implementation of the curriculum. Most teachers felt that parents have been left out when it comes to understanding LARC. On the whole, parents know very little about it. This lack of knowledge does not seem to affect the

use of the curriculum, but teachers did note that occasionally it causes problems. Some schools have overcome these problems by giving parents an orientation to the curriculum. Some statements by teachers on this issue follow.

- We sometimes share the results of the CRT with parents, if it comes up. They don't really know what it is. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)
- Parents are always more interested in the math program. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)
- Parents need more education and orientation toward the curriculum. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)
- Parents do not understand the LARC system. They'll ask, "What reading level is my child on?" or "What basal is he in?" We have to justify why we're not using basals and explain the expectations of the program. Then they don't ask any more questions. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)
- We have trouble with parents. They want a number attached to their kid, like a 3-2 reading level. When you're reading a book, the parent wants to know, "what number is that?". Well, LARC books don't have numbers. (Primary 2 yrs.)
- One parent told me, "I love LARC, but I want to know my child's reading level." (Primary 2 yrs.)
- Also, you get phone calls at 7:00 on a Friday night. Parents call up and want to know why their kid isn't on page 41 like the kids using basals. (Primary 2 yrs.)

- I still use the basal to keep parents happy. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- Parents seem to be uncomfortable with the lack of structure of LARC. The basal gives structure. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- Parents still ask about the basal. To them, reading still means the basal. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- Parents want the curriculum to attach levels to their child's reading ability like the basal system does. (Up. el. 11+ yrs.)
- One G & T parent summed it up beautifully: "Kim is doing real well but we want to know, when is she going to get a real reading textbook?"! (Primary 2 yrs.)
- Parents of slower kids love LARC because their kids don't feel different. (Primary 2 yrs.)
- They like all the novels. I encourage the parents to read the books. (Up. el. 3-10 yrs.)
- Our teachers made LARC mandatory. We have heterogeneous groups. I did straight LARC. Parents would ask, "Is my kid in the top group?" I'd say, "We're all in the same group, but your kid is doing well." We had a great year! (Primary 2 yrs.)

III

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS OF THE INDIVIDUAL FOCUS GROUPS DISCUSSING ISM

This chapter contains the combined findings of the four focus groups which were convened to discuss ISM. The chapter is organized into a number of sections, each of which is devoted to a different component of ISM. These include:

- Overall Views: Strengths and Weaknesses
- Planning
- Administrative Supports (Training/Resources)
- Delivery
- Testing
- Record Keeping
- Collaboration
- Other Issues

Representative comments from the teachers participating in all four focus groups are included in each section as applicable. The focus group which was the source of the comment is identified in parentheses (after the comment) by the following abbreviations:

Prim. 3-10 yrs. = Primary school teachers with 3-10 years MCPS teaching experience (n=11)

Prim. 11+ yrs. = Primary school teachers with more than 10 years MCPS teaching experience (n=10)

Up. el. 2 yrs. = Upper elementary school teachers with 2 years MCPS teaching experience (n=11)

J/I/M = J/I/M teachers of mathematics with more than 10 years MCPS teaching experience (n=10)

When teacher comments are used in the text of the findings, they are presented in quotation marks. When their comments are set off by bullets, quotation marks are not used. Occassionally, the comments have been paraphrased for ease of reading. References to a "few" teachers means two, "some" means three or four, "many" means at least half, and a "majority" means almost all.

A. Overall Views: Strengths and Weaknesses

Overall, the teachers thought that ISM is an excellent system for organizing and managing math instruction. They perceived it to be a comprehensive, well-organized, and detailed sequence of mathematics activities and instruction. They agreed that it is very good for grouping students and for enabling teachers to individualize instruction. They also appreciated the fact that ISM enables teachers to pinpoint any child's progress in math at any point in time. Several also indicated that lesson planning is made easy because of the organization of the ISM curriculum guides. The following comments typify these sentiments.

- Excellent! (Prim. 11+ yrs.)
- I feel it's the best thing MCPS offers! (Prim. 11+ yrs.)
- It's wonderful. I'm sold on it! (Prim. 11+ yrs.)
- I think ISM is the most wonderful thing ever invented! It's the most sensible system I've ever encountered. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)
- Some objectives are too hard, some are too easy. On the whole, though, I like it, especially the testing component. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)
- It gives a child a chance to expand. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)
- It's good for organizing and for grouping kids. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)
- No one slips through the cracks. It allows you to individualize instruction. I love it! (Prim. 11+ yrs.)

- I think that the premise that the system's built on is excellent in that it really does help you to individualize the instruction. . . . The printouts really help you with your grouping. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- When the curriculum is used optimally, it does allow for a lot of individualization. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- It has checks and balances. It keeps you accountable. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)

- It assures us that all the areas of the curriculum are covered. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- It's a very complex system, but I think it's good. It's well organized. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- It is a very organized, sequentially developed curriculum. (Up el. 2 yrs.)

- I think the good point is that you can see where any child is at any point in time. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I find ISM is useful for parent conferences, as I can actually show them what their child has or has not mastered. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I like the thought that with the ISM someone may be real low in geometry or whatever, but be able to take off in area and volume, and they aren't committed to being in a 3rd grade book or a 5th grade book and they can go at their own pace. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- ISM is a comprehensive math program for 1st through 8th grade. (J/I/M)
- The curriculum is well-structured for the low and high-achieving kids. (J/I/M)
- One of the advantages is that we have a good record of the mastery level of any one student. (J/I/M)
- At the elementary school level, the system is very good for teachers who may not have had a lot of math training. (J/I/M)
- I like the ISM curriculum. When it was first implemented I saw a big difference, an improvement in the kids. (J/I/M)

In spite of these plaudits about the system, the teachers noted shortcomings in a number of areas. These include the lack of a single textbook which follows the same scope and sequence as ISM, the lack of a review component, insufficient aide time, and paperwork and competition associated with the assessment process. These and other shortcomings of ISM are discussed in detail in the following sections of this chapter.

B. Planning

Overall, the teachers agreed that it is easier to plan ISM lessons than it is to plan lessons for other subjects because of the way the ISM curriculum guide is organized. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that a good deal of planning time is needed, especially for new teachers. Many of their comments about planning time pertained to the large blocks of time spent in tracking down and/or developing materials which are keyed to the scope and sequence of the ISM objectives (these are discussed in Section C, Administrative Supports). Finally, the teachers agreed that they need more time to use ISM optimally--to be more creative with the lessons and to do more with the subject matter.

- Hours and hours are spent preparing for math. Especially for new teachers. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)
- I kept track for awhile, and I was actually putting in 20 hours a week planning and that was time outside of the school day. There's really no time for planning during the school day. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)
- At least three hours a week, outside of school, are needed to plan for all the different kids. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)
- At first I spent 20 extra hours per week on planning. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)
- The planning time for ISM comes second, after LARC. Much less time is needed to prepare for social studies and science. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- Teachers really need more planning time to use the system optimally. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- If I had more planning time I would be able to shift my groups more often. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- It takes time to find pattern blocks. We don't have it all right there. Even if we did have it all in the closet, it takes time to set it up to make it time efficient. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- . . . all the suggestions in the books are very useful: take index cards, make game blocks, but I wouldn't be able to go to bed at night if I did all these wonderful things. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

C. Administrative Supports (Training, Resources)

Administrative supports includes several areas: in-service training, ISM aide time, textbooks, microcomputers, additional supports and resources, and class size.

In-Service Training

In general, teachers found that the in-service training they had received had adequately prepared them to teach ISM. Several noted that the ISM guides were also very helpful for this purpose. However, while nearly everyone who discussed this issue agreed that the in-services for new teachers are important and helpful, a few teachers indicated that subsequent in-services on ISM are not very informative.

- We learned the whole philosophy behind it. Why it was implemented. How it was put together. We got walked though the manuals and all that so that it was not as frightening. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)
- Workshops for new teachers were very helpful. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)
- We had two in-service courses last year. I found they were great. They taught us problem-solving, fractions, and decimals. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)
- The in-services were good for learning how to manage class time and group fluidity. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)
- ISM is not that complicated. Read the guides and it's all laid out for you. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- The guides make it easier for new teachers to teach. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I tell new teachers, "if you want to learn to teach math, take these guides and study them." (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I was trained in the '60s and I taught for a few years and then left the system. Last year I came back. We had some workshops that were given for new teachers, and I really did feel that they were helpful. But ISM is very overwhelming. Maybe the guides could be pared down to the essentials. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I feel like I've been in-serviced to death...This year we've had three in-services on a using a scanner. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- They took you away from your class — which was how I viewed it -- three days during the school year to talk to you about ISM, and they didn't tell you anything new. It would have been much more helpful if they would have said, "Ok, bring your books, bring your class data and we'll have little work sessions where you can sit and plan. We'll go around and help you." All this time on in-services -- it's a system that takes a lot of planning. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- The in-services are all talking to you instead of letting you do something that will benefit you in your class — actual planning or whatever -- like with the specialist. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- It would be good if some training dealt with developing hands-on gimmicks for teaching basic facts and problem-solving so that we

could get kids away from straight memorization. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)

- We also need training on CSMP (Comprehensive School Mathematics Program) and how it should be meshed with ISM. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)

ISM Aide Time

Nearly all of the teachers indicated that they have insufficient access to aides and expressed the need for additional aide time. They considered this to be a big problem in implementing ISM. None of the teachers indicated that they use the aides to assist in instruction although a few acknowledged that they would like to do so. Specifically, a few teachers mentioned that they would like to use the aides to work one-on-one with students and to review material. Instead, aides are primarily used for demonstrations, assessments and record keeping. Nevertheless, many teachers end up performing many of these functions themselves due to the scarcity of aide time.

- We don't have enough math aides for the school. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)
- We have one aide for 600 kids! So, I end up grading papers and recording grades. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)
- It's unreasonable to have to do all those demos and not have aide time. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)
- I get the math aide only one-half day per month, about an hour. We need more aide time. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)
- You really need aide time to teach all the small groups. Otherwise, I don't know how it could be done. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)

- We use math aides to score the paper and pencil tests and demonstrations and to enter the data into the system. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- In our school we have the math aide for one hour a week. When I have her in, she does demonstrations — not paper and pencil tests because that would be a waste of her time -- and she records it. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- We have a math aide for one-half day per month, which amounts to about one hour. So I have to do the assessments and recording myself. We're just crying for more aide time. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- We really need aide time to teach math. There are kids that need to work one-on-one in math. They just don't function well in a group. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- What aide time? We never have enough aide time. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- We have no math resource help. There's nobody for kids who are really deficient in math unless they're resource, and there are a lot of kids who are really low in math and need everything taught two or three times before they're going to get it. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- Our aides are great. We have two half-time aides. And I don't know if that's appropriate. I feel that they are being overburdened. Our aides don't gripe, they just take work home and do it. They should not take work home, they should let it sit

there and then let teachers complain so that this problem is addressed. Because as it is now, the problem of too much work for the amount of people to do it is not addressed. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- We have an ISM aide hand-scoring cards -- I don't know how long she's going to do that before she quits. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- Last year we had an aide for two hours, this year for four hours, but we were told that we needed a full-time aide just to make the system viable. (J/I/M)

- Kids have trouble getting things to work, we need a lot of aide time to make this system work. (J/I/M)

- What we need is an aide full-time just to do the paperwork and the assessments. (J/I/M)

- We don't have that problem. We have six computers and a full-time aide. The record keeping is not such a problem because we send kids to the ISM room for assessments. The aide is in charge of that. (J/I/M)

ISM Textbook

Although a few teachers liked the idea of not having a textbook because it helped to get parents away from the notion of grade level functioning and tying their child to a specific grade level, many teachers argued that MCPS should produce a textbook and accompanying worksheets which follow the same scope and sequence as ISM. One teacher thought that having a textbook would improve her classroom management because she wouldn't have to keep sending her groups to get different books in the classroom. Many teachers were

concerned that there are not enough reference books for all the children who need them, and several teachers remarked on the fact that so many of the reference books are out-of-print.

- There's not enough books. What happens if you have 15 books and 17 kids have that objective? That happens to me all the time. So you say, "Just forget it, I'll do it myself." (Up. el. 2 yrs.)
- I have more dittos than I have books. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)
- I don't want to be tied down to just one book. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)
- I think it gives a lot of flexibility to use a lot of resources and not be tied to anything. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)
- I have really no resources. There's no good 2nd grade math book. That's one of the reasons, as of right now, that I'm doing a lot of CSMP. For the ISM I need to find some dittos they can work on while I'm working with a group...I've got piles of books and one copy of a workbook, but I don't have time to go through them. They need to be ripped apart and filed by objective number. But that was one thing I didn't have time to do during my summer. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)
- ISM needs updating desperately. There are so many references and yet the books are not available -- they're obsolete! At least at the primary level, the references are completely obsolete. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)
- To give new teachers materials that are supposed to be current -- and they're not -- is <u>very</u> frustrating for them. They're trying

to search out Addison Wesley, page such and such, and that book is long gone. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I think if we're required to teach certain objectives, why doesn't the county publish a book and get all these things together? (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I find myself making up my own material and going to this or that book to find these things. It would make sense for the county to publish a textbook for each level that actually covers each skill and to have enough practice pages for each one because I find that we're developing them ourselves. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I agree that that's a problem. We went last year to view all the brand new math books from all the different publishers that the MCPS math department said we could look at and choose the one we wanted because we weren't happy with the one we had. We went through each one and looked at our objectives, and there wasn't one that matched! We ended up with a brand new series by Harper & Row, but it doesn't even have half of the objectives we're expected to teach, which makes it a lot of work on the teacher to get all of the materials and develop all the worksheets. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- It seems like it would behoove the county to put their own materials together. The metric system, time and money — it seems like there's hardly anything in a textbook on these topics. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- Another thing is that up until about the end of the 3rd grade, students can't copy a lot from a book, and they can't write in the books. Most schools don't have consumable materials. So it would be a big help if the county would make worksheets that would conform with all the different objectives and put a book together with a lot of worksheets. We have to do so much of it. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- If the county produced worksheets and if they had the teachers on the same grade level working on them, you'd be sure that the pages would come out with the right size print. Sometimes the print is so small that the kids can't read it, and we have to redo it. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

Additional Supports

The issue of additional support for new teachers generated some discussion. While it was generally agreed that the grade level guides are helpful for orienting new teachers, they are not perceived as being enough.

- ISM usually overwhelms the new teacher. Instead of asking a new teacher to scope and sequence her objectives, they should just give it to her. Or, they should give every new teacher a book with the recommended scope and sequence. . .with the worksheets right there and in the right order. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I think we could have a much better system when a new teacher comes in. They do send someone in to help, but the way it's done is not particularly effective. They might even pay teachers to do this. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- What I see as being particularly worrisome to new teachers is the sheer volume of everything they're confronted with: the notebooks and pages and flowcharts and all the objectives they have to go through. And on top of that, they're told to cluster. And we spend hours and hours making sense of clustering...But seriously, it really frightens them. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I subbed for a year before I began teaching. When I started to teach, there was nobody to sit down and talk to me. It's fine to look at the guides, but they're overwhelming. The best person I had was the math aide. She came in and sat with me and told me how to do it. She had little tips like checking homework together as a class. Before that I was really pulling my hair out! It's really nice to have someone like that tell you how to make life easier because a lot of times the guides won't tell you. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

Other comments on the need for additional supports follow:

- English teachers are given an extra period to help coordinate their programs, and math teachers need the same. If you're teaching four periods instead of five, that extra period just doesn't do anything, there's not enough time. (J/I/M)

- MCPS might also consider having a central office coordinator just for J/I/M schools. We are stuck between the elementary and high schools. This is a critical period in a kid's life. (J/I/M)

Class Size

A few teachers spoke of the need to limit class size in order to implement the curriculum optimally.

- ...Even if you had one computer for two kids, that would just make matters worse. You'd still have 150 kids for one math teacher, and that's a lot of records to look after. (J/I/M)

- English classes are limited to 28 kids, but we have more kids, typically 32 or maybe up to 35 or 36. Math classes should be limited to 28 kids just like English, even 25 kids would be better. At the junior high level we have to deal with all the needs of the adolescent growing up. (J/I/M)

D. Delivery

Topics discussed under this area concerned the fixed sequence of ISM objectives, the lack of a review component and its effect on student retention.

Several teachers remarked on the sequencing of objectives in ISM. For the most part, teachers follow the sequence suggested by ISM. An exception to this, however, is with the sequence presented for common fractions.

- They are supposed to compare fractions -- 2/3 to 4/5 -- before they are allowed to add and subtract fractions. It doesn't make sense. So I test them anyway, and now the computer will put the assessment on hold until the kid's ready for the next assessment. It's O.K. as long as you do this in the same school year, otherwise the computer wipes it off. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.; Prim. 11+ yrs.)

- I find a problem in fractions -- the common fractions -- in the sequence. I don't think that the sequence is logical because before they can do something as easy as multiplying fractions where all you have to do is multiply numerators and multiply denominators, they have equivalent fractions which is a much more difficult concept for them to understand -- that 2/4 is the same thing as 4/8. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- I used ISM with the skills class last year and was frustrated by it. The kids would learn to add fractions, but not reduce the

fractions, so they would get it wrong on the test, but they wouldn't get credit for what they had accomplished. (J/I/M)

A few of the J/I/M teachers stated that the lock-step sequencing of ISM makes the coordination of the child's overall mathematics skills in preparation for higher level math a difficult task. Some of these teachers agreed that ISM appears to support basic mathematics skills more than it encourages higher order thinking skills.

- In junior high we try to tie the math all together from all lower grades to prepare the student for algebra, but the curriculum is written in such tiny bits and pieces that it's hard to use the system to tie it all together. (J/I/M)

- Kids learn this and that objectives about working with fractions, but can they work a problem that requires them to use three or four objectives at once? (J/I/M)

Another problem associated with the sequence of ISM pertains to the California Achievement Test (CAT). Specifically, some of the material on the CAT is not taught until after the students have taken this exam. A few of the teachers suggested that the CAT be administered in the springtime so that teachers have a change to cover more of the test's content. These and other comments on the CAT follow.

- They get them in November . . . now they haven't even learned, a lot of them, division of fractions and multiplication of fractions and other things on the test. And, they're being tested on that, and I think that's a real problem. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- ISM objectives should be keyed to the CAT so that our 3rd graders are ready for the test. For example, the CAT has multiplication and division, which we don't teach until the second semester, but the test in is November. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- Why don't we move the CAT to the spring so that we can teach what is on it before the kids have to take it? (Prim. 11+ yrs.)

- During the first grading period, there's extra added pressure because of the CAT. So we're teaching ISM and we're teaching for the CAT. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- My kids are tested to death the first semester of school between the Scoring High booklets, ISM, and the CAT. It's not fair on the kids. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

Teachers in every group articulated the problem of student retention and the resulting need to build a review component into ISM.

- One fallacy of ISM is that the kids forget the material. (J/I/M)

- ISM doesn't allow for periodic assessment of retention. (J/I/M)

- The review isn't built in. Some people say that the teachers just rush the children through the assessments, but that may not be true. Kids just don't remember the material over the summer. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- I think the reviews should be built in. We get printouts from the year before and they say "children have mastered X, Y, Z objectives." But we can't assume that they remember them. And

one thing builds on another, so that if they don't know them, they're lost. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- It doesn't matter what level the kids were on at the end of the school year. When they come back in the fall, they have lost a great deal. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- You have to do reviews in math, and I think we need to build something into the system for the people who are doing that. Once the students achieve an objective it doesn't mean that you never have to go back over that objective again. Even in 1st grade. Math is progressive and you need a firm basis. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- Part of it is how the students are tested. Teachers are sometimes a little more lax on what they'll accept as an answer. The amount of work that we have to do, doing all the demonstrations. Sometimes you're just stamping them out, trying to get all the kids through them. And the teacher will decide that the kid's answer is close enough, but it's not; the kid can't do any of it. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I teach math to all the 3rd graders in the school and I can tell which teachers these students had even without looking at the printouts. Because one teacher does reviews and those kids come back in the fall and they can still grasp those skills, whereas with the other teachers' children it's like teaching back to square one. And it's not these teachers' fault because they don't have time to build in that review. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- There was one teacher who taught for the test. It was obvious. They must have learned the stuff on Tuesday morning and were tested on Tuesday afternoon. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- The kids hustle to get through the objectives, but the biggest problem is their retention. (J/I/M)

- The year we started the program in eight elementary schools the biggest concern was that there was no retention. We had a big meeting at the end of the second year and they said the same thing. That was 12 years ago, and yet we still have a retention problem because it's not considered important yet. (J/I/M)

- We have a lot of 6th grade feeder schools and teachers, and a kid will come up on record as having mastered certain objectives but he really doesn't know them . . . What we do is give each pupil a test at entry to 7th grade, and reenter the kid's record ourselves to give our teachers a real starting point. (J/I/M)

- We've been downgrading records to reflect what the kids really know. (J/I/M)

- In our school we are correcting records to reflect to parents what the child really knows. (J/I/M)

Many teachers review information before moving on to a new unit. However, they do not get credit for this (i.e., it doesn't count toward what the teacher is doing in terms of the way his or her performance is judged.

- I'm concerned that at the end of the grading period, they're looking at my printouts to see how many new objectives I've taught. It may be only three or four for a particular child, but, in fact, I've had to review. Just because it says that a child has mastered an objective, it isn't always so. Because it is in print how many new objectives I've covered, I'm concerned that it doesn't accurately reflect what I've done in the classroom. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I agree. I think that certain areas are much more important to teach over a longer period of time than others. If the child doesn't understand place value numeration, the whole counting system is going to be mixed-up for addition, multiplication, division, everything . . . So even when all my kids have mastered the place value numeration objectives for my grade level, I still feel that I need to go back over it. And that unit will take a long time. And if someone goes over my printouts for me, as a teacher, they'll think "one test for this amount of time. She must not be teaching math very much." And it's probably my longest class to teach. There's so much to teach which you can't test that you need to make sure they understand. I'm not sure that the test of how many objectives a teacher has covered in a grading period is a valid way of looking at how good a math teacher this person is. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- A lot of principals ask the math aides to run a printout of the number of objectives covered in the grading period. Then they ask to see the teachers because they've only done one objective.

It's not a fair way to look at what a teacher is doing. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

Related to this pressure to cover increasing numbers of ISM objectives was a concern over the fact that teachers tend to only teach the key objectives and to de-emphasize or ignore the non-key objectives because the assessments take into account only the key objectives. As a result, a lot of useful and important information is not taught.

Another topic related to delivery concerns the ISM cutoff scores. Some teachers were not sure whether ISM cutoff scores are where they should be. Many felt that the transition from kindergarten to 1st grade is too big a jump, mostly because ISM kindergarten objectives are too easy. For example:

- Kindergarten children come into 1st grade as a "1". But, over the summer, they forget what they have learned. They are no longer a "1". (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- There's a tremendous discrepancy between being above grade level in kindergarten and being above level in 1st grade. There's a big jump in terms of expectations. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I think we undershoot as far as kindergarten is concerned. I think we should move the "C" objectives to kindergarten. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

One problem associated with this discrepancy is explaining to parents why their children are no longer a "1" when they move to 1st grade. ("The assumption among parents is that once above grade level, always above grade

level.") Explaining to parents why their children are no longer a "1" however is a difficult task in any grade. The teachers indicated that the problem is partly the lack of directives as to when to call a student above grade level, partly the failure of parents to take into consideration the retroaction over the summer.

E. Testing

Many problems were discussed with respect to both getting the children tested and the associated paperwork. Much of the teachers' discontent focused on the mechanics of processing children through the assessment procedures.

- I get a feeling that in my school the main crux of education is to look good. If our appearance is wonderful then we're a wonderful school. And I'd like to think that what makes a school a wonderful school is that kids are learning. . . Teachers are pushing to assess because it looks good as opposed to wanting the kids to actually know the information. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- I know teachers who give the child the assessment to practice on and do over and over and over again until they get it right, then put them on the terminal. The child didn't learn a thing, doesn't understand the concept. But when he gets to the next grade and it presupposes that he knows this, the kid falls apart. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- I've been yelled at by the aide and very intimidated by the fact that I haven't been testing and ten minutes later, I thought, "I'm the teacher." (Up. el. 2yrs.)

- One of my suggestions with the testing is that maybe we should develop some kind of -- or more of -- cluster group testing. Because I find that on those cards -- scanner cards -- a lot of times the test has only four or five items. And you feel like you do this whole thing about filling out this card correctly, and

getting all these numbers right, and then there's only four questions. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- I would like to see more of the cluster tests or maybe three or four objectives say, just in geometry, put together. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- . . . just have testing blitz days. And just give out a lot of tests in one day. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- Friday is my test day -- ISM or my own test for a little bit of review. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- I had parents coming in, "I'd rather my child be an A2 than a B1." The parents come in, "Why is my child getting a 2?" "You got a 2 because you didn't get through enough assessments on the terminal. You weren't tested enough." The parents get wacked out of shape. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

Microcomputers

The use of the new microcomputers versus the old mainframe computer for student assessments was discussed by several teachers. Not everyone has access to a microcomputer. For the most part, microcomputers are not available in the schools or are restricted for certain grades. Some schools use paper and pencils for assessments; some use scanners. Those that use micros did not seem to think that they are very helpful. This is primarily due to the limited time they have access to them, mechanical problems, and equipment shortages.

- I feel pressure to get kids in front of the ISM terminal . . . And, another thing is I'm organizing groups in the classroom and being able to assess the children -- it's difficult. And then, when I develop the concept or the theory, by time I'm ready to test, the ISM terminal has to be turned over to another teacher. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- We went positively, absolutely nuts, out of our gourd with that stinking terminal last year!!! (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- We don't even have microcomputers in our school. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- We do, but they're not for use in the lower grades, only in Grades 4 through 6. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- We have two micros and 900 students. (J/I/M)

- Last year we had eight or nine terminals on the mainframe, now we have two micros. (J/I/M)

- We have problems with the micros, like this morning the scanner wouldn't read. (J/I/M)

- I liked it on the mainframe better because you could send any kid for testing at any level. Now, on the micro, you can't send two kids for testing who are on different diskettes. Also, we have fewer terminals with micros than we did on the mainframe. Kids have trouble just getting things to work. (J/I/M)

- The mechanical part needs to be a smaller part of the whole. It's getting in the way of teaching, of pulling the concepts together. (J/I/M)

- I have a lot of trouble with the scanner sheet and have to transfer the answers to my own record sheets. (J/I/M)

Finally, the CRT also generated some comments. On the whole, the CRTs were generally viewed by these teachers as a waste of time, as can be seen from the following comments:

- If the CRT is to tell DEA how well the curriculum is being covered, they could just as well check the ISM records. We don't get the results until the next year anyway. So it's just a waste of two or three days. (J/I/M)

- The people trying to implement the CRT system are still figuring out how to do it, so I'm just going to wait until the whole system is standardized. (J/I/M)

- We give the CRTs in the spring and try to give a semester test to prepare the junior high kids for high school. It seems we have more and more things to teach and less time to do it because the testing is taking away from the teaching. (J/I/M)

Finally, none of the teachers admitted to sharing the results of the CRT with parents.

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F. Record Keeping

Most of the elementary school teachers were very positive in their comments about the usefulness of the reports produced by ISM. Many found the assessment results to be helpful for purposes of grouping and individualizing instruction. Most also agreed that the printouts are useful for sharing information about students' progress with parents at conference time. At the same time, however, some of the teachers were reluctant to use the reports for assigning students a grade level rating (i.e., above, on, or below grade level) on report cards.

- That's how you make up your groups. That part of ISM is really helpful. That's the best part because it let's you know exactly what a child knows or what they don't know, and, if you go back, you can see why they don't understand a topic. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- My problem in planning and implementing and using the assessment report is that it doesn't always -- it seldom -- rings true, straight the way it is there. If we were more consistent in true assessing and true evaluating, the data would be more helpful to us. However, it does give you a place to start your pretest. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- What I usually do is I look at the printout and instead of starting on the very next objective, I'll back up a couple of objectives and spend however much time it seems like they need to refresh their memory. And, I found not only does it help me to plan, but it's a good motivation for them. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- The only thing I don't like is that, at report card time, you're supposed to use that one sheet to mark them on, above, or below grade level and I disagree with that because there's so much more that you're doing than taking five tests. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- We've been told that we're not bound by those numbers. At the beginning of 1st grade, for example, you get a lot of kids coming in as a "1". If they start out as a "1" -- and there's no way that they're really a "1" -- and suddenly they're a "3" . . . well, you know that child was never a "1" to start with. And how do you explain that to a parent? (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- Well, we're told to use our own judgment, that if you think that number's off base, just to use it as a guide. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

Most of the J/I/M school teachers, on the other hand, had negative comments about ISM's record keeping component. For these teachers, the copious testing and record keeping was seen as a distraction from the process of teaching, and they resented the loss of time away from their primary mission.

- I think the ISM tests and record keeping is just a waste of time. We calculated at our school that the assessments and record keeping took away about 20 percent of the teaching time. That's one day a week out of class time. (J/I/M)

- The record keeping is maybe useful for elementary teachers because they're not math specialists, but not for the junior high level. Most of us are trying to teach a coordinated program. (J/I/M)

- We're overwhelmed by the record keeping requirements and the few resources we have to do it all. (J/I/M)

- When we were on the mainframe, the computer did all the bookkeeping, now, with the micros, the schools have to do it all. (J/I/M)

- ISM absorbs too much planning time to decide where to test each kid next, update the kid's card, make sure all kids get equal time on the terminal. (J/I/M)

G. Collaboration

There does not seem to be a high degree of collaboration taking place between teachers with respect to ISM. The following comments describe the extent of collaboration that has been achieved among these teachers.

- We share materials and sometimes switch students. For instance, I had a student who was very high. I put him into another teacher's self-contained G & T math class. We worked together so that we'd both teach math at the same time every day. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I teach all three math classes. I keep the other teachers informed about where their kids are in math and what they need to work on . . . for example, if they have free time to work on different assignments. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- There's not a whole lot we can do to collaborate on ISM. What we need is an ISM aide full-time just to do the paperwork and assessments. (J/I/M)

- Don't get the wrong impression. We do a lot of teaching, but ISM is on the bottom of the list. We have the accelerated classes, the basic skills classes, algebra and ISM. We coordinate our materials within these groups, and we may share ideas on managing ISM, but each has to do their own testing and assessment. (J/I/M)

H. Other Issues

Topics discussed here include recognition incentives or awards for student achievement in ISM, parental feedback on ISM, and departmentalization of math in the upper elementary grades.

Some of the teachers discussed their opinions about different kinds of recognition incentives for a school that had worked to accomplish a significant improvement in student achievement in ISM. Although some dismissed the notion of differential pay as being divisive, other types of incentives were suggested.

- I think whenever you start splitting up the pay and giving extra money only to some teachers, then you begin to splinter the group so badly that you have dissatisfaction, you've lost the urge to work together. You should give a raise across the board. When you start paying people differently there's just such bitterness. (J/I/M)

- There's two things you could do -- raise the pay for everybody, and lower everybody's class size. (J/I/M)

- Small classes would be at least as powerful an incentive as money for going to a new school. Maybe not for the beginning teacher who doesn't know what teaching is all about yet. (J/I/M)

- I think if you said, "The maximum class size is 25", right there you'd see the lights go on. (J/I/M)

- In our school, we are in dire need of things to work with our gigantic ESOL population. We need materials and in-service. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- It comes down to money -- extra aide time or materials. These things have to be funded. (Prim. #3-10 yrs.; Prim. 11+ yrs.)

- More planning time. (Prim. 11+ yrs.)

Some of the teachers also discussed the issue of parental feedback on ISM. Several teachers expressed some problems with helping parents understand ISM. The following concerns were voiced:

- They're confused. They don't know what ISM is. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- I had a serious problem last year with the highest math group. We were using a 4th grade book and a 5th grade book. And there were times when we were doing an objective where the work in the 4th grade book was actually more difficult than the work in the 5th grade book. Just because of the difference in publisher or the way it was set up. The first thing parents did when they picked up that book was turn it over to see if it was a grade 4 or 5 book and came storming in saying, "My child is so bright and he's above grade level, why is he in a 4th grade book?" (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- ISM makes parents very insecure. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- There are parents who have never seen an ISM card. I found it helpful to show parents the ISM card. (Up. el. 2 yrs.)

- On parent's night, I give them a list of objectives and explain them to them. (Prim. 3-10 yrs.)

- Parents are interested mostly in the kids finishing the ISM card, not just in what they've learned. They want the kids to get into the higher level math classes. (J/I/M) .

A final issue raised by some of the J/I/M teachers concerned the need for departmentalization of math in the upper elementary grades.

- Most of the elementary teachers don't have a math background. What about departmentalizing grades 4, 5 and 6 so that a math teacher prepares kids better at that level? (J/I/M)

- I think it's important that kids have at least 45 minutes of math instruction per day in elementary school. If you're not a math person, sometimes you tend to leave out things you don't like. (J/I/M)

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APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDES:

IPRLA DISCUSSION GUIDE[1]

ISM DISCUSSION GUIDE

[1]The teachers referred to the reading/language arts program as LARC rather than IPRLA. Aside from on the discussion guide, all references to the program in this report are made to LARC.

IPRLA DISCUSSION GUIDE

I. General Introduction

A. Moderator identification.

B. Purpose of the discussion (part of research).

C. Operational details (1-1/4 hour;refreshments).

D. Ground rules (e.g., one person speaks at a time; informal discussion; your opinion counts—no right/wrong answers; audio tape for moderator's use in analysis but no comments will be tied to any individual by name).

II. Respondent Introduction

A. Respondent's name.

B. School and grade.

C. Years teaching (in general; MCPS).

D. Personal (hobbies, special interests).

III. Overall Views on the IPRLA Curriculum

A. What would you say about IPRLA to a new teacher to MCPS who is unfamiliar with the curriculum? How would you describe the instructional program?

B. (Moderator reiterates the points raised and asks:) Is there anything else?

IV. Attitudes about IPRLA

A. What is your overall opinion of IPRLA? (Do you like IPRLA? Why? Why not?) (Is the instructional philosophy clear? Why? Why not?)

B. Are you comfortable teaching IPRLA? Why? Why not?

C. Are there any major strengths or benefits of the IPRLA curriculum? Please describe in terms of implementation.

D. Are there any major limitations in IPRLA which impact on implementation? Please describe.

E. Is IPRLA appropriate for students at all levels? If not, for what levels is IPRLA appropriate? Why do you say that?

F. How does IPRLA compare to the traditional basal approach? (Is IPRLA really different or is it old wine in new bottles?)

G. (For veteran teachers:) Does the IPRLA instructional program combine well with the former program or did you have to develop a totally new teaching approach? (Probe: Is the IPRLA compatible with the basal reading approach?)

V. Preparation for and Presentation of IPRLA Curriculum

A. Planning

1. How do you feel about the IPRLA in terms of planning and delivering specific lesson plans? Does the program provide adequate flexibility for organization and instruction? Why? Why not?

2. How does the planning time for IPRLA compare with other types of curricula? (Is more, less or the same amount of time required?)

3. How many hours do you spend each week in planning for IPRLA lessons? Is this time provided for during the school day? How much time do you spend at home for purposes of planning?

4. What are some specific things that you would do in IPRLA if you had additional planning time?

B. CRT

1. Are the results of the CRT in IPRLA received early enough in the school year to be useful to you?

2. Do the results accurately reflect what you have taught? Why? Why not?

3. Do you communicate the results to parents?

C. Administrative Supports (Training, Resources)

1. (For new teachers:) How did your college education prepare you for teaching this type of reading/language arts curriculum? If not, why?

2. What is your opinion of the training you received in IPRLA? What changes or additions in training would you make?

3. What is your opinion of the IPRLA support materials? Are some materials more useful than others? Which ones? Why do you say that?

D. Record Keeping

1. Do you use the Reading and Listening Student Record Form? If not, why not?

2. What changes in record keeping would you recommend?

E. Collaboration

1. What forms of collaboration take place in your school? (That is, working with other teachers to ensure that a unified, comprehensive approach to IPRLA is taught to students at all grade levels.)

2. Do you feel that there is a need for more or less collaboration? With whom (what levels of teachers)? How often? What form should this collaboration take?

F. Other Issues

1. If your school staff worked together to achieve a significant improvement in student achievement in IPRLA, do you think your school should receive some kind of special recognition for that successful effort? What form should that recognition take?

2. What kinds of feedback have you received from parents on IPRLA? How has this feedback affected your implementation of the IPRLA curriculum?

3. Do you think that the IPRLA has any impact on teacher attrition?

VI. Recommendations

A. What specific steps could MCPS take to help your school improve its students' success in IPRLA?

B. What specific steps could MCPS take to help you improve your teaching in IPRLA?

VII. Wrap-up/Summary

A. Moderator summarizes key points of discussion, asking group if the summary is accurate? Do they have any further comments?

B. Thank participants.

ISM DISCUSSION GUIDE

I. General Introduction

A. Moderator identification.

B. Purpose of the discussion (part of research).

C. Operational details (1-1/4 hour;refreshments).

D. Ground rules (e.g., one person speaks at a time; informal discussion; your opinion counts—no right/wrong answers; audio tape for moderator's use in analysis but no comments will be tied to any individual by name).

II. Respondent Introduction

A. Respondent's name.

B. School and grade.

C. Years teaching (in general; MCPS).

D. Personal (hobbies, special interests).

III. Overall Views on the ISM Curriculum

A. What would you say about ISM to a new teacher to MCPS who is unfamiliar with the curriculum? How would you describe the instructional system?

B. (Moderator reiterates the points raised and asks:) Is there anything else?

IV. Attitudes about ISM

A. What is your overall opinion of ISM? (Do you like ISM? Why? Why not?)

B. Are there any major strengths or benefits of the ISM curriculum? Please describe in terms of implementation.

C. Are there any major weaknesses in ISM which impact on implementation?

V. Preparation for and Presentation of ISM Curriculum

A. Planning

1. How does the planning time for ISM compare with other types of math curricula? (Is more, less or the same amount of time required?)

2. How many hours do you spend each week in planning for mathematics lessons? Is this time provided for during the school day? How much time do you spend at home for purposes of planning?

3. What are some specific things that you would do in ISM if you had additional planning time?

B. Administrative Supports (Training, Resources)

1. How do you feel about the adequacy of the training you received on ISM? If inadequate, how so? What changes or additions in training would you make?

2. How do you feel about the use of ISM aide time in implementing the curriculum?

3. As you know, there is no single textbook which follows the sequence of the ISM objectives. How do you feel about this situation? How does this situation affect the way you teach?

4. How has the availability of school-based microcomputers changed the way you teach the ISM curriculum?

C. Delivery of ISM

1. Do you or other teachers present lessons in the prescribed sequence? If so, why? If not, what would be the impact of teaching out of sequence?

2. Is the relationship between the ISM objectives and the students' ability levels appropriate? (Probe: Is the number of objectives that students must master to remain on-grade level in ISM reasonable for most students? Are there too many objectives to cover in a single year?)

3. What is your opinion about adding more HOIS objectives to the ISM curriculum?

4. Do your students have to leave the classroom for ISM assessments? If so, does their leaving the classroom affect your delivery of ISM? Please explain. (How many teachers administer paper and pencil assessments? How many use microcomputers for assessments?)

5. In what ways do you use the results of the ISM assessments in your class (that is, do you use them for grading, for small group instruction, etc.)?

6. Do you report the results of ISM assessments to parents? How (e.g., on report cards, via letter, telephone)? Is this reporting done for all students or just for those in jeopardy of failing?

7. Do you receive the results of the CRT in mathematics? If so, do you use the results? How? Are the results of the CRT received early enough in the school year to be useful?

D. Record Keeping

1. Do you use all the prescribed reports relating to ISM? If not, why not? (Probe: Which reports are most useful to you as a teacher? Which reports do you believe are of no direct benefit to your students?)

2. What changes in record keeping would you recommend?

E. Collaboration

1. What forms of collaboration pertaining to individual or group achievement in ISM take place in your school? (That is, working with other teachers to ensure that a unified, comprehensive ISM program is provided to students at all grade levels.)

2. Do you feel that there is a need for more or less collaboration? With whom (what levels of teachers)? How often? What form should this collaboration take?

F. Other Issues

1. If your school staff worked together to achieve a significant improvement in student achievement in ISM, do you think your school should receive some kind of special recognition for that successful effort? What form should that recognition take?

2. Have you received any feedback from parents on ISM? What has been the nature of this feedback? How has this feedback affected your implementation of the ISM curriculum?

3. Do you think that the ISM curriculum has any impact on teacher attrition?

VI. Recommendations

A. What specific steps could MCPS take to help your school improve its students' success in ISM?

B. What specific steps could MCPS take to help you improve your teaching in ISM?

VII. Wrap-up/Summary

A. Moderator summarizes key points of discussion, asking group if the summary is accurate? Do they have any further comments?

B. Thank participants.

APPENDIX B

METHODOLOGY FOR CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUPS

METHODOLOGY FOR CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUPS

The following sections describe the host of activities associated with the preparation for and conduct of the focus groups. These include pre-training activities, the actual conduct of the groups, and data analysis.

Pre-training Activities

DEA awarded a contract to S.W. Morris and Company to design and conduct a focus group research moderator training course to provide DEA with the in-house expertise to develop and moderate groups on a wide variety of topics of interest to MCPS.

Prior to the conduct of the training course, the contractor produced a training manual. The manual, which served as both an instructional tool and a handy reference to all activities associated with focus group moderation, contained the following sections:

- definition and purpose of focus group research, including a discussion of its advantages and disadvantages as a research methodology
- descriptions of different moderator styles
- the production of a focus group discussion guide
- guidelines for recruiting and conducting focus groups, including the selection of facilities
- the development of a screener for recruiting focus group participants, including examples

- a discussion of some of the common problems associated with moderating focus groups and suggested solutions to these problems.

Next, working in close cooperation with DEA, two discussion guides were prepared, one on LARC and one on ISM (see Appendix A).

Concurrent with the above activities, teacher participants were recruited by DEA staff for Stage 2 of the training (i.e., the conduct of the actual focus groups by the trainees). In order to obtain the depth and breadth of teacher experience, teachers were selected on the basis of two criteria: (1) grade level (primary, upper elementary, and J/I/M); and (2) number of years of MCPS teaching experience (two years, three to ten years, more than ten years).

For primary and intermediate levels, 12 teachers were selected at random[1] from each of the following categories:

	2 Years	3-10 Years	More than 10 Years
Primary	X	X	X
Intermediate	X	X	X

At the J/I/M level, 12 teachers were selected at random[1] from the following categories:

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[1] Although teachers were selected at random, this should not be construed to mean that the final group of participants consisted of a statistically representative sample of MCPS teachers.

	2-6 Years	More than 10 Years
English	X	
Mathematics		X

Thus, eight groups of teachers were sampled, 12 per group, from a total of 39 schools county-wide.

Letters of invitation were sent to the teachers selected for participation. A separate letter was sent to each teacher's principal, as well as to the Area Associate Superintendents, informing them of the focus groups. To encourage teacher attendance, DEA assumed the cost for half-day substitutes.

Conduct of Focus Group Training

DEA selected eight members of its staff to participate in the training. The training occurred over a four-day period in October 1986.

The first day of training consisted of an in-depth review of the manual. Trainees were introduced to the whys and wherefores of the focus group methodology, shown examples of different moderator styles, and taught how to handle some of the common problems associated with focus groups. In addition, a detailed review of the LARC and ISM discussion guides took place at this time. Finally, the first day of training was devoted to role playing various focus group scenarios in order to provide trainees with the opportunity to practice its principles and techniques (e.g., practicing the introductory segment, drawing out participants who are reluctant to speak, handling participants who monopolize the discussion, etc.).

Over the next three days, each trainee moderated an actual focus group session. Each session lasted approximately one and a quarter to one and a half hours. The trainer from S. W. Morris was present at these sessions to observe the trainees (behind the one-way mirror) and critique their performance. Trainees also observed all sessions from behind the one-way mirror.

The moderators followed the discussion guides prepared for the groups. However, because of time constraints, it was not possible to discuss both LARC and ISM at a single session. Thus, each group was arbitrarily assigned to discuss either mathematics or reading/language arts, with four groups assigned to each curriculum.[2] Similarly, due to both time constraints and the direction of certain discussions, not all topics were covered in each group.

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[2] The actual number of teachers who participated in each group is displayed below by curriculum, grade level, and years' teaching experience:

	Number Participating	Grade Level	Years Experience
LARC	12	Primary	2
	10	Upper Elem.	3-10
	10	Upper Elem.	11+
	10	J/I/M	2-5
ISM	11	Primary	3-10
	10	Primary	11+
	11	Upper Elem.	2
	10	J/I/M	11+

Data Analysis

Information obtained during the focus groups has been summarized to correspond more or less to the headings on the discussion guides. These headings include:

- Overall Views on (LARC) (ISM)
- Strengths and Weaknesses of (LARC) (ISM)
- Planning
- CRT
- Administrative Supports/Resources
- Delivery
- Record Keeping
- Collaboration
- Other Issues

To assist in summarizing the sessions, audio tapes of each session were made.

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